CENTRAL EUROPE, EAST EUROPE AND THE BALTICS: A CHANGING STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE – FOUR KEY TRENDS

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The last two years have changed the European strategic landscape from the very basics. It affected both individual European countries, as well as the North Atlantic Alliance as a whole. Russia's military and political engagement and operations in Eastern Ukraine, together with the annexation of Crimea, re-wrote the nature of important bilateral and multinational relations nature of warfare and strategic balance both on the regional and the continental level. The effects and implications of the Russian operations were not distributed on the same level in every European country. What's more, the intensity of public perception towards Russia's actions was different. Still, NATO membership constitutes a strategic community with security for its member states. The aim of this paper is not to analyze the Alliance's adaptation to the new strategic circumstances, nor to analyze the issues related to it, as hybrid warfare or information warfare/propaganda. The objective of this paper is rather to identify the key strategic trends and changes in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics in a broad belt from Scandinavia to the Black Sea, which will determine the future strategic landscape in that larger region.

It is possible to identify four key strategic trends within the above mentioned geographical zone, which appeared as a consequence of Russian actions. First, the dramatic change of Ukrainian public's threat perception and foreign policy and strategic orientation of the country. Second, the widening of Poland's – the natural geopolitical leader of Central Europe – strategic and security networks at the regional level, especially towards Romania and Sweden. Third, the emergence of Finnish and Swedish discussion about closer relationship to NATO, however on a differing scale and with different results, which has strategic significance for the whole Baltic region, and offers some strategic depth, as well as dramatic changes of both of these countries' strategies. Fourth, the growing importance and strategic weight of the Black Sea region, its heavy re-militarization and its transformation from a secondary strategic location (from the point of view of the main European strategic axis) to one of the two main hotspots in Europe (next to the Baltic/Polish vector). The paper also has the ambition to provide an analysis of those factors which contributed to those changes. Besides the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, some of the issues the paper addresses are the Russian military build-up and snap exercises and development of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. In addition to the general driving force for the changes also individual motivations are analyzed and described.

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICS IN UKRAINE: NOT AN EVOLUTION, A REVOLUTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE WEST AND RUSSIA

I consider Ukraine's strategic orientation a key strategic factor not only at the regional level, affecting Central Europe, but also having an impact on the all-European level. Taking into consideration Ukraine's strategic importance and potential, as well as the geopolitical location at the crossroads of Central and Eastern Europe, just southwards from the Moscow–Minsk–

Warsaw–Berlin strategic axis, and with access to the Black Sea – and more broadly into South Caucasus, and through Bosporus to the Mediterranean – every significant change in Kyiv's strategic goals impacts the region's and Europe's overall status and situation. Ukraine's demographic clout with more than 40 million citizens and economic potential (largely remains a potential than a real economic weight, so far) are bigger than the rest of the Eastern Partnership countries altogether. Because of that the whole concept of the EU's EaP, as well as Russia-backed Eurasian Union cannot be politically and strategically successful without Kyiv's inclusion. What's more, EU's eastern neighborhood cannot be stable and secure without the stability and progress in Ukraine. In other case – if Ukraine is controlled by Russia or becomes economically, politically and socially a failed state – the EU will face permanent instability from the East. Thus every significant change in Ukraine's foreign policy, public opinion or domestic issues related to foreign policy has the potential to be a real "strategic level game changer" at all-European level, precisely due to the strategic weight and geopolitical situation of the country. It is the reason why this paper analyzes the dramatic changes among the Ukrainian public, which happened during the period of early 2014–2015, as one of the four key regional trends with decisive impact on European security. The most significant changes took place in the perception of threats, sources of threat to Ukraine's security (NATO, USA, Russia), the institutional guarantees of Ukraine's security (NATO vs. CSTO), and public and political support for potential membership in NATO or CSTO.

The support for non-block status, or a kind of neutrality, was very deeply rooted in the Ukrainian public till the beginning of 2014. Research conducted by the Razumkov Center in Kyiv, which focused on the population's preferences with regard to the "national security model" for Ukraine demonstrated that in February 2012, two years before the Russian invasion, the non-bloc status enjoyed the highest, 37.1 % support, of all potential alternatives, while the Russian-led CSTO gained almost 20 %, and NATO only 12.8 %. Moreover, according to the same source, the support for NATO membership declined from 16.2 % in 2006 to the above-mentioned 12.8 % in 2012 (by the way, so has the support for CSTO, with simultaneous increase of undecided respondents); (Razumkov centre n.d.).

Gallup (2014) research came to very similar conclusions: 14 % of Ukrainians considered NATO as "protection" in 2012, and 17 % in 2013, but around 30 % of them described the Alliance as a "threat" (however this opinion's support has decreased from 43 % in 2008). At that time, there were significant regional differences in NATO's perception within Ukraine: in June–July 2013 almost half of Ukrainians (46 %) in the eastern part of the country, including the Crimea, viewed NATO as a threat, while only 8 % in the West and 18 % in Central Ukraine saw NATO as a threat (Ray and Esipova 2014). Russia was considered a threat by 18 % in 2006 and by 24.7 % of Ukraine's population in 2014, at the (symbolic) eve of war with its eastern neighbor.

All this means that before 2014, the Ukrainian population was reluctant to support membership in any organization, and preferred the neutrality status of their country. Compared to Russia's and NATO's perception from that period, the Alliance's support was significantly lower – below 15 % – and Moscow's CSTO was gaining higher support. In addition, NATO was perceived as more of a threat than a potential security provider.

After the war erupted at the beginning of 2014, support for NATO membership rose very sharply in a short period. By the end of the same year it reached, for the first time after Ukraine's independence in 1991, the levels above 50 % – exactly 51 % in November 2014 (24 канал 2014). As the situation in Donbass – and also Crimea – remained unresolved and Russian interference continues, the support for potential NATO membership kept its rising potential. In August 2015 the support reached almost 2/3 of the population, 63.9 % to be exact (Ukraine Today 2015). According to the same source, only 28.5 % of Ukrainians was against membership in the Alliance (in 2010, 68 % of the population was against NATO membership). Those results were supported by other institutes and organizations measuring the changes in public opinion in Ukraine. Overall, the numbers for NATO membership support were between 62–66 percent (Pasos 2015).

The shift of public perception had also a significant impact on the distribution of votes to political parties, entities and personalities, according to their foreign policy and strategic priorities. In all elections held after spring 2014,

the majority of Ukrainians supported those political parties as well as the president, who are in favor of European and Euro–Atlantic integration. As Grigory Perepelitsa, from the Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine mentioned at the 2nd South Caucasus Security Forum in Tbilisi, in November 2014 "more than 80 % of Ukrainians voted for pro-European and pro-Atlantic parties in elections to the Verkhovna Rada." This all means that, for the first time since 1991, one of the strategic vectors has unquestionable dominance over other alternatives (Ondrejcsák 2014, 127).

The shift in public opinion was accompanied by changes of the Ukrainian foreign policy orientation and overall strategic priorities. The country officially abolished its non-aligned status in December 2014. It gained overwhelming support in the Verkhovna Rada, by 303 votes to eight, and, according to Mr. Pavlo Klimkin, minister of foreign affairs, "This will lead to integration in the European and the Euro–Atlantic space (BBC 2014)."

The above-described political and public opinion earthquake was confirmed by the most recent strategic documents of Ukraine, issued in 2015. The most important of them are the Security Strategy issued in May 2015 (Указ Президента України 2015) and Military Strategy approved in September the same year (Президент України 2015) – all confirming the shift. The Security Strategy de facto declares four main goals: restoration of the territorial integrity, independence of the security sector from Russia, as well as in the realm of defense reforms, and integration into the European Union and NATO. It is no accident that 3 of the 4 basic goals are related to changed foreign policy orientation directly, with the fourth one – reforms – also closely linked to it.

In the Military Strategy, the changes are even more significant, respectively more precisely detailed. Russia was directly named as an entity leading to destruction of Ukrainian sovereignty and occupying parts of Ukrainian territory. The Ministry of Defense must conduct all necessary reforms, according to the strategy, which would lead to more integrated and interoperability forces with NATO members – declaring EU and NATO integration as central goals of Kyiv's policies. The wording and description of integration goals are

important in their own right (however, some critics hold that "these two initial steps were not followed by decisions to implement and finalize the development programs, the Defense Ministry and the General Staff have not fulfilled the president's order and have offered neither the Armed Forces development program, nor the weapons development program" – the author fully supports the idea of reforms being strategically important for Ukraine to fulfill its integration ambitions, on the other hand, their assessment is not an ambition of this paper); (Butusov and Tyzhnia 2015).

The consequence of all of those changes is more than serious, even determining for Central European and overall European security. First, as a novelty in public perception and political discourse, the Western orientation and potential membership in NATO gained a clear predominance over other alternatives for the very first time. It is also connected to the very fast improvement of, if not the creation of the Ukrainian "political nation", which is now able to incorporate and integrate various geographical, linguistic, historical and cultural identities, including those from the East and South. It means that even if not legally, at least mentally Ukraine is out of the "strategic grey zone" which dominated over it national identity for the last two and half decades. If Ukraine's western orientation remains a constant factor – which depends on both sides, Kyiv and Europe – it will represent the biggest strategic opportunity for the western world in broader Europe for decades to come. This opportunity, which holds the prospect of the country's integration into the EU, can only be compared to that for Turkey.

Second, for Russia the results of the last two year's actions are in best case mixed, and in a realistic assessment undoubtedly negative. In the eyes of the Ukrainian public Russia has transformed itself from a brotherly nation to the biggest existential threat to the country. The gap – both mental and even more emotional – between Russia and the Ukrainians will be there for generations. Moreover, the current Russian leadership's communication ("junta in Kyiv", etc.) and actions are further deepening this rift. The result is that during the period of 2014–2015 Russia secured several significant tactical victories at the expense of Ukraine – seizing Crimea, favorable military balance in the Black Sea, improved geostrategic position, partial control over

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foreign policy ambitions of Ukraine by using the de-facto frozen conflict in Donbass as a carte blanche – but is gradually suffering a strategic defeat: it lost Ukraine as a whole long-term (not to mention the economic damages, which are beyond the scope of this paper. All this however significantly limits Russia's freedom of action and capacity for independent strategic decisions, as well as its long-term global and regional positions). In the past, Russia had a neutral /non-allied Ukraine in its neighborhood, with limited foreign policy opportunities, the public opinion mostly, even if not fully, neutral-to-positive with regards to Moscow. What's more, it had Ukraine in a strategic grey zone, with informal Russian control over Ukrainian security structures and apparatus, and partially also politics. That's all changed now in light of the above.

POLAND'S BROADER REGIONAL ENGAGEMENTS – BROADENING THE SCOPE OF REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS: ROMANIA AND SWEDEN

For two decades Poland executed its foreign and security policy on the basis of two key regional cooperation frameworks – Weimar triangle at the European strategic level and the Visegrad cooperation, which was Poland's primary regional framework for security cooperation. Even if the V4 cooperation was not able to produce real results in the field of military and defense – with rare exemption of the V4 Battle Group, on stand-by for 6 months in the first half of 2016 – the countries of the region shared very similar perception of strategic interests in their direct neighborhood. The European and potentially Euro–Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and Eastern European countries were in the focus of V4 strategic interests (One has to note that there were slight differences in particular with regards to counties' individual geographical preferences: Hungary has been more attached to the Western Balkans, Poland was leaning East, and there were also differences in the intensity of perception of these strategic goals).

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Poland was always the strongest promoter of bringing the East closer to the EU and NATO, especially Ukraine. The real litmus test came after the Russian–Ukrainian war in 2014 and the domestic changes in Ukraine and when the gradual (however long-term) narrowing of the gap towards the EU and potentially NATO became a reality (however distant), as well as when it ran up against strong Russian opposition.

The rest of the countries of Visegrad Four reacted differently: Slovakia and Hungary were themselves aligned to a group of countries with a more understanding stance toward the Russian position. Especially Slovakia, with its Prime Minister Fico describing the potential NATO membership of Ukraine as a security threat (Ondrejcsák 2015, 57–67), has single-handedly ceased the tradition of one of the main supporters of Kyiv's Euro–Atlantic integration. This positioning, and also the perception of Hungary and Slovakia by their partners, was only slightly modified thanks to Bratislava taking some concrete steps to help Ukraine, particularly in the field of gas exports and securing supplies for Kyiv. Czech Republic was sending mixed signals, with the country's president de facto uncritically supporting Russian positions, and the government adopting a more balanced position. Poland has found itself in a different world entirely from its V4 partners in reacting to the Ukrainian–Russian war, and when it came to dealing with its consequences (making calls for substantial NATO presence in the region, for example) and how to deal with Ukraine itself.

The permanent presence of Allied militaries, especially the US, but also British, and probably French, has become the centerpiece of Polish diplomacy, to close the regional capability gap between NATO's eastern flank and Russian forces in the western strategic direction. On this issue, it doesn't really matter who is in the Polish government – former Polish minister of foreign affairs, Radek Sikorski asked for two "heavy brigades" or 10,000 troops in the spring of 2014, almost immediately after the Russian–Ukrainian war erupted (Buckley, Fontanella-Khan and Cienski 2014) – and the current government in Warsaw has an ambition to include this among the key issues at the Warsaw summit in July 2016. According to the most recent and widely published information, there is a solid chance for deployment of one US brigade-size

force to the region, particularly Poland and the Baltic states, and a deployment of approximately a battalion-size of British troops. (However, according to a recent RAND study, based on war games between summer 2014 and spring 2015, the Alliance has to have at least 7 brigades, including 3 heavy armored, to counter a potential Russian aggression in the region); (Shlapak and Johnson 2016). Other V4 states are less enthusiastic about allied presence in the region (see comments of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico), however the Czech Republic already publicly declared its support for the Polish request.

By having diverging positions on the most important strategic issue for Central Europe for decades – the future of Ukraine – the V4 foreign policy and strategic consensus was significantly weakened, in some cases terminated. While the V4 cooperation still preserved its potential and real essence in the field of political, economic, and cultural cooperation, its strategic unity has significantly weakened (the rapprochement on migration issues will bring only temporary unity, as it's more of a political rather than a strategic issue for V4). On the basis of this development, Warsaw moved towards the more like-minded countries in the broader region, who shared the same perception of developments in Ukraine, as well as Russia's behavior and operations. This change remained undetected in other V4 countries, unfortunately, but it nevertheless will determine the nature of Central European – Baltic network of strategic partnerships in the future. Besides the Baltic countries which shared the same threat perception and the strategic destiny with Poland, Warsaw's has focused in on other two countries: Romania and Sweden. The idea of closer Polish–Romanian partnership is not a completely new idea. Poland and Romania even signed a strategic partnership agreement already in 2009, however the level of cooperation remained limited (Urban 2015). Geostrategically, Romania has been focusing on the Black sea, Moldova, while Poland's focus has been the V4 and Ukraine. Nevertheless, from a long term perspective Poland and Romania are the two of the largest and demographically strongest and also most pro-American NATO-members on the Alliance's eastern flank. In a PISM paper (Kulesa et al. 2013) published in November 2013 the researchers outlined a wide range of issues which could be the subject of deepening bilateral relations. On the other hand, before

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early 2014 it was more about the potential and opportunities, rather than a real strategic partnership (they could not predict the events in Ukraine, of course). After the Russian operations in Ukraine, both Bucharest and Warsaw expressed very deep concerns over Russian actions, with both countries' strategic positions significantly affected (Poland over the Baltics, Kaliningrad/Belarus/Western Military District of Russia, and Romania over Crimea/Black Sea). Both countries are in the first zone of potential large scale Russian attack in their direct neighborhood. Poland shares a border with Russia (Kalinigrad), while Romania found itself in a strategic range of Russian forces after the annexation of Crimea (plus has to deal with Russian presence in Transdnistria); both face serious Russian Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities from its strongholds (Crimea and Kaliningrad), which complicates their potential defense. Both of them share similar concerns: asking for more robust NATO presence at the eastern flank of the alliance, both will host new regional commands of NATO, and both are advocating stronger American presence in Europe in general and trying to accommodate at least elements of US military installations (anti-ballistic missile defense, for example).

The most recent Polish National Security Strategy, published in 2014, while referencing the position of Weimar Triangle and Visegrad Group as "key formats", also calls for "New areas of collaboration among Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, the Nordic Group and Romania, as well as in other regions of Europe (NSSP 2014, 9)." Further, the "development of the potential for cooperation with, *inter alia*, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the Nordic countries, and Romania "constitutes the key tasks of Polish diplomacy (NSSP 2014, 31)."

Romanian leadership was receptive to Polish initiatives. The newly elected president, Klaus Iohannis, emphasized the same strategic priorities as those of Poland even during his election campaign: strong focus on NATO, plus building special partnerships with the USA, Turkey and Poland. The two presidents met in Warsaw in March 2015 where the (then-president) Komorowski declared "this strategic partnership is an absolute necessity because of the situation in our region of Europe, which has witnessed a profound, negative change in terms of security" (Urban 2015). Moreover, during

the Komorowski–Ioannis meeting in March 2015, they discussed the potential of broadening their bilateral cooperation include Ukraine. This would significantly change the Central and Eastern European strategic cooperation, however a lot still needs to be done to make this idea work, especially at the bilateral level between Ukraine and Romania, to reconcile potential tensions (navigation disputes on Danube, borders, minorities). In March, the Romanian president visited the Ukrainian capital, and the visit, despite some positive developments, did not open a real "new chapter" in their relationship (on the other hand, Romania was the first EU country to sign the Association Agreement with Ukraine).

In December 2015 Romania and Poland signed an agreement on security, economy and European policies called "The 2016–2020 Action Plan of the Strategic Partnership between Romania and Poland." The two countries again reaffirmed their shared view on NATO's priorities, as the Romanian foreign minister, Lazar Comanescu declared that "both Poland and Romania want "a more robust" NATO presence in the region. "A presence with a clearly defensive character and which aims at strengthening security in our area and in our neighborhood." (NEOnline/GK 2015). His Polish counterpart agreed that "one priority would be the strengthening of NATO's presence in countries on the Alliance's eastern flank" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2012).

In case of Sweden, both Warsaw and Stockholm share a similar threat perception to the Baltic perspective, given that the Baltic vector is vital both for Poland and Sweden, and they also represent approximately similar power potential (the economic advantage is on the Swedish side, while the demography underlines Polish strength) and last but not least, they also have a tradition of cooperation and presenting strategic ideas at the EU level, notably the Union's Eastern Partnership. Stockholm and Warsaw also share relatively similar views on developments in Ukraine. What's more, they are trying to represent these views jointly with the Baltic states, Romania and Bulgaria and warning of accepting the annexation of Crimea and the new frozen conflict in Donbass as a new status quo by Brussels and some member states" (Schmidt-Felzmann 2015).

A joint paper on strategic cooperation among the two countries, elaborated by both Ministries of Foreign Affairs in October 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2013) was already counting with a very wide range of initiatives and projects, including in security and defense vis-à-vis EU's Eastern partnerships. However, the bilateral relationship gained strategic depth and more security-related dimension after spring 2014. In September 2015, the two defense ministers met in Warsaw and signed a cooperation agreement in the field of defense. Polish Minister of Defense declared their shared view, that *"The Baltic Sea became a sea-zone of danger, thus tightening the military cooperation between Poland and Sweden is needed and purposeful" (Defence24 2015).* According to Swedish Defense Minister, Peter Hultqvist, the motivation of Sweden to strengthen cooperation with NATO as a whole, as well as individual member states (Government Offices of Sweden 2013), with Poland as one of the most exclusive partners, is due to the increased presence of Russian warships and warplanes in the Baltics (The Local 2015). The rising significance of Swedish–Polish relationship was underlined further by a symbolic move of the newly appointed foreign minister of the new Polish government (after elections in November 2015), Witold Waszczykowski, who paid his first foreign visit to Sweden and Finland (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2015). In the future – especially if the conflict in Ukraine will not de-escalate, which is unlikely, and mainly if the Russian steps will continue in the current direction (large-scale snap exercises, which will be analyzed in the next sub-chapter, violation of air space and sea boundaries, deployment of significant military potential in the western military district in offensive posture) one can expect further deepening of both Polish–Swedish and Polish–Romanian cooperation and partnerships.

RUSSIAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES IN BROADER BALTIC REGION; FINLAND AND SWEDEN: POLITICAL-STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND PUBLIC OPINION

Sweden and Finland are both witnessing significant dynamics in their public and political discourse on security, including the strengthening of their partnership with NATO, as well as serious measures to counter Russian activities. In case of Ukraine, the reason behind the dynamic changes of public opinion, political discussion and overall strategies is absolutely clear. For better understanding of Swedish and Finnish dynamics, it is necessary to analyze the reasons behind the changes and driving forces, especially their perception of Russian activities.

One of the most sensitive issues are the large-scale Russian military exercises in the Baltic region, Belarus and the western military district of Russia, next to land or sea borders with Sweden and Finland, or in their relative proximity. Probably the most analyzed and discussed is the so-called "Zapad-2013" ("West-2013") snap combat exercise with participation of joint forces, of Russian Western Military District (with headquarters in St. Petersburg)[1] and Belarus and the vast majority deployed to Western Russia, Belarus, the Kaliningrad Oblast, and the Baltic Sea (Järvenpää 2014). The scale of the exercise is also significant: officially, as the Russian Federation declared for the OSCE, 12,900 soldiers in Belarus and 9,400 in Kaliningrad were engaged, but according

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[1] Created within the new military command structure adopted by December 1, 2010 on the basis of former Moscow and Leningrad military disctricts, Baltic Fleet, Northern Fleet (without strategic nuclear submarines deployed to Kola penisula), the 1st Air Force and Air Defense Command, and forces of Kaliningrad Oblast. It is the main command structure for the forces responsible for operations in the western strategic axis, including Central Europe and the Baltic space. After finalizing the reforms, it will have more than 60 brigades or its equivalent in permanent readiness or be comprised of reserves in mobilisation. It is very important that the readiness and reaction time is very short, only 6–8 hours. See The Military Balance 2013, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Routledge, London, 2013, quoted by Järvenpää.

to several unofficial sources it is only the "top of the iceberg" (Järvenpää 2014). With the inclusion of participating naval and air forces troops, other land forces in support and in the logistics role, staff, Ministry of Interior troops, the final real number is somewhere between 70 and 90 thousand troops, instead of the officially declared approximately 23 000 (Järvenpää 2014). In contrast to Zapad-2009 (with 15,000 Russian and 6,500 Belorussian troops); (Stratfor 2013), the exercise where Russia incorporated a simulated nuclear attack against Poland, in 2013 there was no information about direct involvement of nuclear weapons, however the strategic troops were in higher readiness status.

Zapad-2013 is used as an exemplary case to demonstrate how a potential Russian invasion towards the West (or in a "Russian military double speak", a "large conventional adversary") could look like, with regards to the size of troops involved, the weapons systems engaged, and the strategy applied. It demonstrated high readiness, mobility and deployability of Russian troops, as well as the political will of Russian leadership to deploy forces on a strategic scale. While Russia has demonstrated that while NATO in general still possesses more capable in de facto all categories, there is a huge regional disparity in the Alliance's eastern flank: the combined capabilities of all eastern member states, plus even Swedish and Finnish capabilities are significantly weaker than those of Russia. The official Russian scenario was that a "terrorist group" seized a part of Belorussian territory from the Baltic states and Russian–Belorussian forces launched a counter-attack to destroy the "terrorist" element and terminated its supply lines. However, the scope, size, the type of troops deployed and weapons systems used are indicating the real scenario, going far beyond what an anti-terrorist operation would require. The Finnish assessment presented by J. Järvenpää is that the operation was radically new by size and scope, as well as strategic objectives and the intensity and numbers of Russian exercises significantly rose in the vicinity of Finland. Some Polish representatives, strictly off record, said that they operate with a Zapad-2013 type operation when calculating war games how to defend Poland and the region (in so-called Suwalki Gap).

Zapad-2013 was not the only Russian military exercise which struck a nerve with the Finnish and Swedish public and the strategic planners alike. Previously, a notable large scale exercise next to Finnish border was the Ladoga-2009, and later a smaller one – in September 2012 – held in Petrozavodsk, Karelia. What's more, in April 2012, an air force exercise Ladoga-2012, followed by another in June at air defense brigade level in areas of Karelian Republic, Murmansk, St. Petersburg and Tver regions took place (Järvenpää 2014, 14). One of the most alarming exercises for the two Scandinavian countries was conducted in March with the participation of around 33 thousand troops, and the scenario included a quick seizure of northern Norway, (demilitarized) Åland islands of Finland, island of Gotland (Sweden) and Danish Island of Borholm. If such a scenario would be realized, Russia would be able to completely take control over the Baltic strategic hotspots in a relatively short time, which would make it practically impossible for NATO to reinforce and defend its Baltic member states (Lucas 2015).

Even though the exercise was not carried out in the proximity of Scandinavia, by size it is so significant that it constitutes the biggest snap exercise conducted by Russia so far. It took place in 2015, and involved around 300,000 troops, 1,100 aircraft and 280 ships deployed throughout the territory of Russian Federation (Kulesa 2016). Given the main theatre was not in the Western Military District, the size of the exercise, mobilization of forces and their scope is impressive and affects every strategic dimension (The Moscow Times 2015). (The same worries are expressed not only by Scandinavians, but also the Balts, Poles and NATO's military authorities. Also see numerous interviews and declarations of SACEUR General Breedlove, and the head of the Military Committee, General Petr Pavel).

Besides the scale and size of the forces engaged, the exercises demonstrate that the most important and alarming factor is the strategic mobility and high speed and tempo of deployment. Without understanding this, one cannot deal with concerns of Scandinavian and NATO military planners and strategists. According to the minister of defense of Russia, the country's armed forces have "capability to deploy up to 65,000 troops over 3,000 kilometers within 72 hours as a goal (Kulesa 2016)." It is a speed and scale which de facto

nobody is able to react to, not even NATO Scandinavian countries or NATO as such itself. This capability was at the center of Russian military reforms conducted after 2008. In theory, all Russian airborne units should be deployed within 24 hours after alert. During the peak of the war with Ukraine, the Russian armed forces kept 40 to 150 thousand troops in full combat readiness formations along and across the Ukrainian border. Simultaneously, Moscow also conducted exercises in other parts of the country, with the participation of up to 80,000 troops of all branches. Moreover, the units stayed in the field in combat-ready conditions for months before being rotated (Gressel 2015).

According to Chief of General-Staff, General Gerasimov (whose doctrine is considered to be the cornerstone of Russian hybrid warfare), Russia will focus on reinforcement of its military potential with emphasis on Crimea, Kaliningrad and the Arctic (RT 2015). The emphasis on western strategic direction was followed by the creation of three new army divisions in the Western Military District (Kulesa 2016). The 152nd Missile Brigade stationed there will receive the new Iskander short range ballistic and cruise missile system between 2016 and 2018 (Kulesa 2016). The overall modernization of Russian Armed forces' geographical focus is also the Western Military District: the operational deployment of the new main battle tanks and also new armored fighting vehicles on the basis of Armata, Kurganets-25 and Bumerang platforms, planned from 2016–2017, will be launched in units deployed to Western Military District, particularly the recently formed 1st Tank Army and 20th Guards Army (Kulesa 2016).

Besides exercises and improvements to its offensive posture and potential towards the West and Scandinavia, the next determining factor for changes of the Scandinavian public perception were the intrusion or close-to-intrusion scenarios in Baltic and Scandinavian airspaces. In 2014 alone around 400 interceptions of Russian airplanes were conducted by air forces of member states, of which more than 150 were realized by the Baltic Air Policing Mission (NATO n.d.). In 2015, the number of interceptions remained at the same level, with around 160 of them conducted by the Baltic Air Policing Mission (Kulesa 2016). In September 2014 two Su-24 fighter-bombers violated the

Swedish airspace next to the Island of Öland, which resonated with the public. The former Foreign Minister Carl Bildt called the incident "the most serious aerial incursion by the Russians" in almost a decade (The Local 2015). (For more about incidents and violations by Russian forces see Lucas 2015). In addition, the operations of Russian submarines in the Baltics increased by almost 50 percent "between January 2014 and March 2015, as compared to the 2013 figures" (Sputnik 2015).

An emblematic move with decisive public effect happened in 2013 during Easter Holidays when Russia conducted an exercise which included a simulated nuclear strike against Swedish targets – Småland in southern Sweden and the National Defense Radio Establishment, the Swedish agency for signals intelligence just outside Stockholm as the likely intended targets (The Local 2016). This information was widely circulating among the security experts and officials, as well as the public, but recently was officially confirmed (The Local 2016). The fact itself is alarming enough for Swedish representatives, but of bigger concern was the fact that the Swedish air force was unable to react properly to the deployment of two Tu-22M3 bombers escorted by four Su-27 fighters. Only Danish planes, part of NATO Baltic Air Policing Mission, were able to react, scrambling from their Lithuanian airbase. Based on Moscow's action, the demonstrated military potential and the political will to deploy those forces led the Swedish intelligence service, Säpo, to refer to Russia as the "biggest threat" (The Local 2015).

As the Baltic countries, Sweden and Finland belong to the same security complex, which means that their security is inseparable. Both Helsinki and Stockholm perceive very sensitively the changes at the Eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, which also influences their actions. In a RAND study – based on a war game – which was analyzing the capabilities of the Alliance to protect Baltic states, the planners and analysts worked with the alternative of using Swedish military infrastructure, especially airfields, for NATO's operations in case of Russian attack against the Baltics (Shlapak and Johnson 2016). While it remains ambiguous, the authors of the paper say that their assumption that Swedish authorities will allow NATO to do it, are based on (unofficial) consultations with Swedish representatives in Stockholm.

The development of Russian Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities in the Baltics, with focus on Kaliningrad Oblast – one of two key areas along Crimea, where Russian A2/AD efforts are focused – especially the latest generation S-400 surface-to-air systems, and potential deployment of Iskander short-range ballistic missiles and Bastion coastal defense systems (known from Crimea) indicates very strong A2/AD intentions (Ministry of Defence 2015, 19–20). Deployment of these systems, especially the S-400 will not only give Russia strong A2/AD capabilities in the Baltic space, and strengthen or terminate NATO's ability to reinforce its units in the region, but also enable it to gain control over almost half of Polish airspace, and huge part of Baltic states' airspace by creating no-fly zones (Freedberg JR 2015).[2] That potential, combined with the capability of very rapid deployment of significant force in the Baltics, can create a fait accompli for NATO, when Moscow would try to prevent the Alliance from further engagement in the region – a very dangerous development for Scandinavians, indeed. Moreover, Russia can add the threat of deploying tactical nuclear weapons, to secure the gains in the very first phase of the conflict, as in the recent Russian strategic thinking they are considered a tool of "de-escalation" of the conflict (while in Western thinking it is obviously the opposite).

Those factors combined had a significant impact on the domestic political and strategic discourse both in Sweden and Finland. The result was a significant rise of the support for NATO membership, especially in Sweden, and to a smaller extent in Finland. In November 2014, 37 % of Swedish population was in favor of their country's NATO membership, 36 % was against, while 27 % remained undecided (Defense News 2014). This trend was confirmed by the latest polls: in September 2015 more Swedes were in favor of NATO membership than against (The Local 2015). According to the poll, 41 percent are in favor of seeking membership in NATO, 39 percent are against it and 20 percent were uncertain. The increase, compared to the pre-war period, is very significant and sharp – the same source in 2013 has put the potential

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2   According to General Breedlove, NATO SACEUR, Russians are creating "bubbles" over Kaliningrad and Crimea.

NATO membership support at 29 percent of Swedes and only 17 percent in 2012 (Defense News 2015). The increase could also be related to a research conducted by Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences in 2013, the results of which were widely published and discussed in Sweden. According to the report Sweden is able to defend itself for about a week in a large-scale conflict. It was also confirmed by the Chief-of-General Staff, Sverker Göranson: "In the event of a possible attack against Sweden, we would always need help from abroad" (The Local 2013). The report and the comments of military leader resonated in the public discourse, and have resulted in more pro-NATO positions.

At the political level, the ruling Social Democrats remain against membership in NATO, as their coalition partners, the Greens. On the other side of the spectrum, the right-wing Centre Party changed its attitude towards NATO membership in early September 2015, while the liberals were supporters even before then (The Local 2015). The rationale behind that significant shift is clear and was described in Svenska Dagbladet newspaper by party leader Annie Lööf together with foreign policy and defense spokespersons Kerstin Lundberg and Daniel Bäckström: "We lack the ability to defend ourselves for a longer period of time. At the same time NATO is very clear about the fact that Sweden cannot expect military support if we are not full members of the organization. We can no longer close our eyes to that" (The Local 2015). The Christian Democrats, another important element of Sweden's right wing scene, voted in October 2015 at their party congress in favor of seeking NATO membership (Reuters 2015). Sweden is now split into two camps. First, the right-wing pro-NATO (in 2015, they held 40 % of parliamentary seats); (Nilsson 2015), however up until 2014 they have formed a government for 8 years, during which time they did not prefer NATO membership (Nilsson 2015), but the situation was completely different then. Second, left-green supporters of Sweden's neutrality (even if their voters are divided, the pro-neutrality camp is much stronger: 52 percent of Social Democrat voters said they did not want to join NATO while 30 percent said they would like to see Sweden become part of the Alliance. The Green voters were 61 percent against and 27 in favor); (The Local 2015). Moreover, there are some voices among Prime Minister Löfven's advisors on foreign and security policy that Sweden's policy

of neutrality is outdated and has been rendered obsolete by the country's increasing cooperation with NATO (Nilsson 2015). The right wing's shift on this position and some changes on the left are considerable for the country's political landscape. On the other hand, until there is no left-to-right consensus, it is difficult to expect a swift application for membership in the defense organization.

The Russian reaction to those changes was rather undiplomatic, the Russian Ambassador to Sweden, Viktor Tatarinstev, declaring that "the country that joins NATO needs to be aware of the risks it is exposing itself to... Russia will have to resort to a response of the military kind and re-orient our troops and missiles" (Nilsson 2015). Also the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova announced that a Swedish drive for NATO membership would not only have political-military consequences but would also require "retaliatory measures". But in the end, that threatening language did not deter the Swedish population or its political elite, quite the contrary; it has pushed them closer to pro-NATO positions.

Finland and Sweden belong to the exclusive group of "enhanced partnership" with NATO, approved in Wales in 2014 (along with Australia, Jordan and Georgia), and the two countries also signed a Host Nation Support Memorandum of Understanding with the Alliance (NATO n.d.). Naturally these moves don't imply any security guarantees by NATO in the framework of the Article V., "They only make such a commitment operationally easier to accomplish" (Binnendijk, Cagan and Simonyi n.d., chap. 6). Sweden also considers joining the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force of NATO (Defense News 2015). (For further modalities of enhanced partnership see the study by Center for Transatlantic Relations, SAIS, Johns Hopkins University (Binnendijk, Cagan and Simonyi n.d., chap. 6).

Even though not related to NATO, one Swedish reaction to Russian action was the re-militarization of the island of Gotland. Even so, the renewed military presence (Adams 2016) still remains rather limited: 300 soldiers in the newly created Gottland Battle Group, 14 Leopard-2 main battle tanks, perhaps some air force detachment including JAS-39 Gripens. It still trails far

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beyond Cold War levels, when around 15–20,000 military personnel was deployed to Gotland, but demonstrated that Stockholm is determined to react on Russian militarization of the Baltics and its "seizure scenarios".

Finland's public debate is slightly different to Sweden's, however according to a recently published paper by CTR, SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, "for the first time in the Finnish history, the debate on NATO membership has been analytical and open. The debate has moved from "Should we start to debate NATO or not?" to "Should Finland join the Alliance or not?" (Siitonen 2015)."One of the veterans of Finnish diplomacy and political life, former president Martti Ahtisaari, argued already in 2012 in favor of the membership: "it would be very difficult to demonstrate that Finland would enhance its security by staying out of NATO" (Helsingin Sanomat 2002). While the nature of the debate is different, the motivations are the very same as in case of Sweden (the list of Russian violations of Finnish sovereignty, especially by air force, is also long); (Buhne 2015). The Finnish Defense Minister Carl Haglund attracted international attention on March 30, 2015, when he said that Russia would be unlikely to respect Finnish neutrality in a theoretical scenario of a war between Russia and NATO (Siitonen 2015). The threat perception of Finnish population has changed similarly as in Sweden: in September 2014 43 % considered Russia a threat, which is about 20 percent increase only in a few months, from March 2014 (Harress 2015). On the other hand, Finland's public opinion did and does not show such a "Swedish shift" and the country remains pro-neutrality oriented – with the camp for NATO membership still far from majority. In March 2015 only 27 % of Finns favored membership, which however points to already a significant, 10 point increase from 17 % in 2014 (Nilsson 2015).

What's more, in case of Finland, there is a significant change of military strategies and preparations underway, which is even more important than the change of public opinion. As a country that shares more than 1,300 kilometers of border with Russia and is without allied security guarantees and is located further away from NATO (in comparison to Sweden), Helsinki is developing its autonomous "survival strategy", based on individual capabilities. The Finnish strategic approach accepts the fact that in case of large-scale

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invasion there is a very high probability of reaching Russian military goals, but the centerpiece of their strategy is to put the potential cost of such an invasion at an unacceptable level.

In order to be able to reach the "unacceptable level" incorporates also the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine: from January to May in 2014, Ukraine carried out the most significant single military mobilization in Europe since the Second World War, deploying 15 to 20 brigades to Eastern Ukraine. This generated sufficient force ratios of about 1:3 to defend against Russian and Russian-backed forces. "This is consistent with a general principle in military planning that says that defending forces, which achieve a 1:3 force ratio can hold the attacking forces at a 65–75 percent chance of success."[3] It means that the invading forces still have relatively high chance of success, "but at a higher cost and in a manner unlikely to be quick and decisive" (Hicks and Conley 2016).

Reaching of this "unacceptable level" cost is based on several factors, especially on large-scale mobilization and long-range strike capability, as an act of conventional deterrence. The Finnish long-range strike capability deep into Russian territory (de facto conventional deterrence) is based on air force's F-18 planes equipped with AGM-158 JASSM air-to-surface missiles (according to various unofficial Finnish sources it would be able to critically damage crucial oil facilities in Karelia, or connections from Russian mainland to Murmansk and the High North.[4]) By the way the other state in the region which gained such a capability from the US, was Poland and Warsaw has made a serious attempt at gaining Tomahawk cruise missiles, too.

The second element of deterrence is a strong reserve force of up to 900 thousand (although some other sources put it significantly lower, but still significant troop levels) – a few months ago, they received a "standby readiness"

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3   See Dupuy 1984. For discussion on the 3:1 force ratio, see Earsheimer 1989. See also O'Hanlon 2015.

4   Consultations of the author.

letter (International Centre for Defence and Security n.d.) from authorities, as a symbolic step which was – according to Finnish hopes – carefully followed in Moscow.[5] In case of mobilization, Finland would be able to deploy very significant force, applying methods of asymmetric warfare to counter Russian invasion.

From the political view in case of both Sweden and Finland, any potential move towards NATO membership would require a referendum, given the fact that in both cases neutrality is deeply rooted in their identity and political discourse (even though in the case of Sweden it was an autonomous decision based on two centuries old tradition, while Finland was pushed to neutrality by Moscow after WWII in a move to avoid military occupation) and still enjoys considerable public support.

Nevertheless, all the Russian aggression towards Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea are not only crucially important for Sweden and Finland because of military and strategic consequences – it also demonstrates the failure of non-allied/non-bloc status countries in a neighborhood of militarily more capable and revanchist power. Being non-allied in case of Ukraine heavily limited Kyiv's freedom of diplomatic actions, as well as the ability to get support, even if only one considers weapons deliveries, not to mention direct military involvement. That said, it is quite unlikely that Russia would operate only against Finland and/or Sweden, but one cannot rule out this possibility completely – and the Ukrainian experience is more than a cautionary tale. In this situation the strategic dividing line between "members" and "non-members" is more significant than at any time before. There is a theoretical chance for engagement of the Alliance in their defense (see RAND study Shlapak and Johnson 2016), as they are a part of "western cultural space", politically and economically significant and integrated. Moreover, any likely scenario would include attack on NATO-members too (in addition, Finland and Sweden share one security complex with other Baltic countries), but this is so far in the realm of speculations. That said, one thing remain certain:

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5   Consultations of the author.

the more the Russian forces will be deployed in an offensive posture, the greater the scale of military exercises Moscow will conduct in the proximity of Swedish and Finnish borders, and the more threatening language Russian authorities will use the, more it will push those two neutral countries towards NATO membership.

GROWING IMPORTANCE OF THE BLACK SEA – REMILITARIZATION AND THE DISAPPEARING MILITARY AND STRATEGIC BALANCE

Even if the main strategic axis of European theatre still lies and will remain around the Belorussian–Polish regional complex, the Black Sea's level of "securitization" as well as overall strategic importance has significantly increased after 2014. Until spring 2014 the only significant security problem – from the perspective of European security and defense – in the Black Sea was the Russian–Georgian conflict over South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the frozen conflict and Russian presence in Transdnistria.[6] While both were significant, they were limited in scope, geography and strategic relevance for European security. Non-Black Sea powers, including the USA, were not particularly engaged in the regional balance, and the same applied for NATO as a whole.

After the annexation of Crimea the whole region became a very important strategic playground, with significant resources and forces involved. Russia's actions increased the strategic stakes, which already reached the threshold of strategic sensitivity of NATO and also the United States. Moreover, the continuing militarization of the region by Russia has a potential to completely

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6 The Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, including the issue of Nagorno Karabakh, has a determining influence on regional security, with very high potential of escalation into an open large-scale war, but none of those two states has the potential to directly threaten European security.

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ruin the regional military balance. If the current trends are maintained, Russia's military potential will trump the combined potential of all other Black Sea states. It is a huge shift as before the strongest navy of the Black Sea was the Turkish one, but in the foreseeable future without engagement of external powers these regional actors will not any longer be able to counterbalance Russia's growing capabilities.

The strategic balance was shaken immediately after Russian seizure of Crimea: first, because of geography given Crimea's very central position in the heart of the region, and second, by the de-facto termination of key capabilities of Ukrainian Navy and Air Force. The Ukrainian Air Force lost around 20 percent of its capabilities by Crimea's seizure (Wilk 2014) and the Ukrainian Navy lost the vast majority of its vessels and infrastructure (11 naval units, 6 service vessels, 2,363 automobiles, armored vehicles and special machinery, and 24 aircrafts, and the only major surface vessel that remained in Ukraine's hand is the *Hetman Sahaidachny* frigate); (Vorotnyuk 2015, 15–19). The loss of Crimea also very negatively affected the Ukrainian Navy's basing structure, which was built around Crimean geographical area: "After the annexation, Ukraine lost its main naval bases, infrastructure, and equipment, which greatly limited the operational capabilities of the Ukrainian fleet. The Ukrainian navy's headquarters was moved to Odessa, and navy structures are to be re-staffed anew" (Vorotnyuk 2015, 15–19). Moreover, the seizure has limited not only its hardware and capabilities, but also the operational reach, leading to reduced defensive potential from the southern vector.

For Russia, the seizure of Crimea has a real strategic value (Schwatz 2014), including significantly broadened operational scope of Russian navy and air force by gaining new bases, extended power projection possibilities, also via access to Sevastopol, a warm water port with very extensive infrastructure, without the necessity of negotiation with Ukrainian authorities (Wilk 2014).[7]

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7   Not to mention the annual costs of rent formerly paid to Ukraine, 97 million USD, from 2017 the plan was 100 million USD annually.

A significantly increased ability of the Russian Fleet to project power in the Black Sea basin, including in case of any conflict with Georgia, would make Georgian defenses more vulnerable. Russians got even broader possibility to bypass Georgian defense forces from the sea by a way of amphibious operation.[8] This, together with Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities of Russia (see below), could have a damaging influence not only to overall security of Georgia, but also its integration ambitions. The reason behind is that the Russian build-up will significantly complicate the defense of the country in case of large-scale Russian invasion. And if the military planners deem it that Georgia cannot be effectively defended, that will certainly decrease the political will to invite the country to join the Alliance, as nobody wants to compromise Article V guarantees.[9]

Crimea also holds a unique geographical location for launching amphibious offensive operations, not only in to post-Soviet space, but also towards Rumania, Bulgaria and Turkey, and further to the Mediterranean, and also could be used to blockade South Ukraine, especially Odessa and to strategically cut off Ukrainian access to the seas. As one study published in Foreign Affairs describes "Sevastopol is the only naval base in the Black Sea capable of outfitting and dispatching new vessels and military hardware at a strategically significant level. As long as Russia controls it, Russia will be the only regional power to exercise control over the body of water" (Gramer 2016).

After the annexation, Russia launched a transformation of the peninsula into one of the most significant military hubs of the country. It can be served both as a power projection base, as well as an Anti-Access/Area Denial stronghold, from where at least half of the Black Sea can be covered by A2/AD capabilities.

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8   The Black Sea fleet operates the 197th brigade of amphibious ships, which has six ships on duty: three Alligator class (Saratov, Orsk, Nikolai Filchenkov) and four Ropucha class (Novocherkassk, Azov, and Yamal), as well as one inactive Ropucha class ship, the Tsesar Kunikov.

9   Those fears from several NATO military planners were vocal even before the annexation of Crimea, now they are even more pronounced, strictly unofficially – author's consultations.

Crimea is also home to Russia's Fleet's 11th Coastal Defense Missile Brigade, which deploys the K-300P coastal defense system, armed with the capable Yakhont anti-ship missile. Also, it holds the advanced S-400 air defense missiles, together with combat aircraft operating from Kacha (with 20 Ka-27 and 10 Mi-8 helicopters, among others) and Gvardeyskoye air bases (with 22 Su-24M attack planes). From the Ukrainian perspective, Crimean airfields could be used by the Russian air force to target Ukrainian mainland, as well as the south and southwest of the country.

Almost immediately after the annexation, plans to deploy Tu-22M Backfire bombers were announced,[10] together withTu-142 and Il-38 maritime patrol and anti-submarine aircrafts. In March 2015, Russia deployed 10 Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers to Crimea during "snap drills" and in addition, it plans to develop Gvardeyskoye air base to house 10 Tu-22M3 by 2018. If Kremlin will make all announcements and plans real, Russia will be able to project long range air power effectively in the Black and Mediterranean Seas (as an example, we can point to the long-range strikes conducted in Syria). The Tu-22M3 represents both strike as well as anti-access potential, and could threaten NATO and American vessels in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. American and NATO bases and command centers in the Black Sea region will become potential targets of the Tu-22 bombers based in Crimea. Moreover, that strike capability can be used as a blackmail or instrument of a political pressure towards any state of the Black Sea region, including NATO members. The overall number of Russian troops from all services in Crimea amounts to approximately 50 thousand (Vorotnyuk 2015, 15–19), including the 810th naval infantry brigade in Sevastopol and the 382nd independent naval infantry battalion based in Temriuk. In July 2015 Russia announced the possibility to

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10 The Tu-22 Backfire was designed during the Cold War as part of the reconnaissance strike complex of the Soviet Navy whose mission was to attack American carrier strike groups or NATO maritime groups with long range cruise missiles. However it is a relatively old platform by design and age, it was constantly updated and still constitues the backbone of Russian naval air force strike capabilities. In the naval strike role, the Tu-22M3 can be equipped with 10 Raduga Kh-15 missiles (NATO: AS-16 Kickback) or up to three Raduga Kh-22 missiles (NATO: AS-4 Kitchen). Moreover, they are dual-use, so, besides conventional missions, they could be equipped also with nuclear warheads.

deploy the newly created 97th regiment of the 7th Air Assault Division to the Crimean peninsula (Kulesa 2016). There are also speculations about deployments of tactical nuclear weapons – according to minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, nobody can limit Russia where it deploys its own forces on its own territory, and Russia certainly considers Crimea as being "Russian".

But first, Russia needs to modernize its Black Sea fleet to transform this potential to a reality. At first glance, the Russian Black Sea fleet already represents a significant capability. Its flagship is the Slava-class cruiser Moskva. Large combat vessels also include the Kara-class cruiser Kerch, the Kashin-class destroyer Smetlivyi, and two Krivak class frigates (Pytlivyi and Ladnyi). A second Kara-class cruiser, the Ochakov, was decommissioned several years ago and was used to block the exit of several Ukrainian Navy ships from Lake Donuzlav (Gorenburg 2014). However, the average age of its ships in the Black Sea Fleet is 25 years, while the ships based in Sevastopol have an average age close to 32.5 years. Ships based in Novorossiysk are generally younger at 23 years. So currently Russia has around 40 ships at its disposal, 28 of them deployable (Gorenburg 2014).

As was previously published, there is an ambitious plan to modernize and increase the size of the Black Sea Fleet. Moscow plans to invest USD 2.3 billion on the Black Sea Fleet by 2020, and that's only to develop the naval infrastructure in Crimea, according to Admiral Chirkov, Commander of Russian navy (Visan and Manea 2015). According to plans, the Black Sea Fleet will receive a total of 6 upgraded Kilo-class submarines (2 of them in 2015), 6 Admiral Grigorovich-class frigates with anti-ship missiles and multi-purpose missiles, and four Ivan Gren amphibious ships (Bender 2015). Only the future will show how the current economic troubles, as well as operational costs of the Armed forces in Ukraine and Syria, will consume resources for its development (Visan and Manea 2015).

The whole fleet will have approximately 206 ships by 2020, if the economic troubles do not eat away the earmarked resources. Besides the addition of approximately 80 new ships, the naval base of Novorussiysk is also slated to be expanded (Bender 2015).

From NATO's point of view, both the current improvements and future plans are seriously limiting the Alliance's freedom of action in the Black Sea basin. Similarly to the Baltics, as described above, Russia is heavily investing into anti Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities (A2/AD)[11] deployed to Crimea. If not countered effectively, it has a potential to turn Black Sea into a "Russian Sea" from strategic-military perspective. The Russian A2/AD capabilities can create a situation when none out-of-the-Black Sea navy or air force could effectively operate in the region. As the NATO's SACEUR, General Breedlove warned, Russia will be able to create an A2/AD "bubble" over the Black Sea: "Essentially, their (anti-ship) cruise missiles range the entire Black Sea, and their air defense missiles range about 40 to 50 percent of the Black Sea" (Gibbons-Neff 2015).

The potential deployment of Iskander (NATO codename SS-26 Stone) tactical short-range ballistic missiles could represent a higher level of strike capability. If Russia deploys them to Crimea and Kaliningrad, they could be used to counter the pre-positioning of NATO and American troops in Romania, Poland and the Baltic states, including the U.S. troops deployed at Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base in Romania. If such a scenario ever occurs, the United States may react by deploying missile defense systems – surface-to-air such as the Patriot complemented by an anti-ballistic missile system such as THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) – to protect its troops in Romania and its ally itself.

So how did NATO and the US react to the changed situation? First, by significantly increasing the naval presence: the number of days when US warships were deployed to the Black Sea rose from 27 in 2013 to 207 in 204 (but in 2015 it decreased below 200); (Kucera 2015). According to Montreux convention from 1936 a warship not belonging to any Black Sea state can be deployed not

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11   With some simplification: the ability to keep away the potential expeditionary powers from the region.

more than 21 days in a row in the Black Sea,[12] which is one of the reasons why the US Navy's presence is rotational (the other reason is political: no decision has been made about the permanent presence in the region, so far). The increased presence of US Navy and other NATO navies, especially French, in the Black sea is a strong signal to Russia, that the Alliance, nor Washington accepts the attempt to transform the Black sea to an exclusive Russian domain, moreover, according to the US Maritime Strategy, the freedom of navigation in international waters is one of the key strategic interests of the US. The US will gradually increase its presence in the region: as president Obama announced an investment of 1 billion USD to strengthen American presence in the broader Central and Eastern Europe, the former US defense secretary, Chuck Hagel declared that significant part of it will be used for supporting "stronger presence of US ships in the Black Sea (Draitser 2015). According to Vice Admiral James Foggo, Deputy Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe, "Over the past year, (2014 – author's note) we have sustained a presence in the Black Sea, even as we operate consistently in the Mediterranean... We are making our presence in the region 'normal,' and we are conducting regular and frequent exercises and engagements with navies in the area... We've tried to maintain near-continuous presence in the Black Sea because it is an important region" (Harress 2015).

At the level of the Alliance, a new Multinational Division Southeast[13] was created with headquarters in Bucharest, Romania, and activated on December 1, 2015 (NATO 2015) as a part of the new command structure. It will provide a high readiness capability to command forces deployed within the Southeast European theatre of NATO's Eastern flank. The NATO's Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) conducted exercises "designed to improve interoperability and enhance rapid integration of Alliance maritime assets... The force trained anti-air, anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare

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12 Plus also includes list of tonnage and number of ships, which cannot be more than 15, 000 t, and, the total tonnage of simultaneously maximum 9 ships cannot surpass 30, 000 t.
13 The other one is the Northeast command in Szczeczin, Poland by Poland, Denmark and Germany.

procedures during separate exercises with the Turkish, Bulgarian and Romanian navies " (Draitser 2015). As part of SNMG2, NATO deployed significant military assets to the Romanian port of Constanta and started to conduct exercises in the Black Sea on regular basis.

Some NATO members, but especially Romania, started to call for permanent NATO fleet in the Black Sea. According to Mihnea Motoc, the Romanian Defense Minister, Bucharest will try to advocate the idea at NATO's Warsaw summit in July 2016 (Popescu 2016); (however, it is not clear how it would fit with the Montreux convention). While it is not connected to Russian build-up in Crimea, NATO's gradually built ballistic missile defense capability will include facilities in the Black Sea region, too. In December 2015 an "Aegis Shore" Naval Support Facility with SM-3 interceptors and Aegis SPY-1 radar were already activated at the Deveselu base in Romania (it will be followed by similar facility in Redzikowo, Poland in 2018). However, the system's scope and possibilities are limited, and are unable to counter Russian ballistic missile potential, which will be used by Russia as an excuse to deploy missile strike capabilities in the Crimea (Iskanders).

A recent paper published in the Foreign Affairs calls for the following measures to be adopted by NATO to counter Russian re-militarization of the Black Sea, especially the Crimean build-up (Gramer 2016): first, to develop a Black Sea version of Baltic Air Policing mission to protect Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish airspace; second, to establish a permanent naval presence of the Alliance in the Black Sea, with NATO's Mediterranean Operation Active Endeavour as an example, also with participation of US cruisers equipped with Aegis anti-ballistic capability (by the way, so-far Turkey was reluctant to accept stronger allied presence in the Black Sea).

The developments in the Black Sea region changed not only the regional strategic landscape, but significantly influenced the whole European security architecture. They contributed to NATO's transformation, to the increase of American military presence in Central and Eastern Europe, plus were also reflected in NATO's new command structure and the Alliance's overall shift of focus to its eastern flank.

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It is necessary to note that the Black Sea region has its specifics in comparison to the Northeast European theatre. In Northeast and Central Europe in the case of large-scale conflict, mainly sizable army formations should be deployed, at division to army level, supported by air forces, while navy would be important, but only secondary to land forces. On the contrary, in Black Sea region, one could expect combined naval-air forces deployments in case of large-scale conflict, while the operation of land forces would remain more limited, perhaps at level of (several) brigades (the only exemption would be a total Ukraine-Russia war). Of course, both northeast and southeast theatres are closely interconnected, not only strategically and militarily, but thanks to the improving Polish-Romanian partnership, as well as the increasing American engagement, also political. Basically it is impossible to separate their strategic destiny: whatever happens in one, will determine the situation in the other one.

CONCLUSIONS

The developments have been analyzed with the long-term in sight; their impact will influence regional and European security and strategic situation for decades to come. There are more constant factors at play, but also those which cannot be foreseen or predicted, especially the decisions of Russian leadership. As Moscow's decision to invade Ukraine and annex Crimea was a game changer of post-Cold War European security – and which has translated to numerous regional game-changers, including the four analyzed in this paper – Russia has a potential to repeat it again. The unpredictability is an integral part of the current European strategic landscape. It is possible to count with relative endurance of Ukrainian public's views, or increasing Swedish and partially Finnish discussion on NATO membership, but one cannot predict the reaction of the Russian Federation to those developments – which were paradoxically provoked by Russian actions, and especially in case of Scandinavian countries, also rhetoric. What remains certain is that the four key trends analyzed in this paper will be among the most important determining factors for European security for the long-term.

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